

ALAN WATTS

## *The “Mind-less” Scholar*

I have never had a formal teacher (*guru* or *rōshi*) in the spiritual life—only an exemplar, whose example I have not really followed because no sensitive person likes to be mimicked. That exemplar was Suzuki Daisetz—at once the subtlest and the simplest person I have known. His intellectual and spiritual mood or atmosphere (風) I found wholly congenial, although I never knew him really intimately and although I myself am an entirely different kind of person. Suzuki introduced me to Zen when I first read his *Essays in Zen Buddhism* in mid adolescence, and in the years that followed I read everything he wrote with fascination and delight. For what he said was always unexpected and open-ended. He did not travel in the well-worn ruts of philosophical and religious thought. He rambled, he digressed, he dropped hints, he left you suspended in mid-air, he astonished you with his learning (which was prodigious) and yet charmed you with scholarship handled so lightly and unpretentiously. For I found in the engagingly disorganized maze of his writings the passage to a Garden of Reconciled Opposites.

He showed why Zen is immensely difficult and perfectly easy, why it is at once impenetrable and obvious, why the infinite and eternal is exactly the same as your own nose at this moment, why morals are both essential and irrelevant to the spiritual life, and why *jiriki* (the way of personal effort) comes finally to the same point as *tariki* (the way of liberation through pure faith). The trick in following Suzuki was never to “stay put,” as if you had at last got his point and were on firm ground—for the next moment he would show you that you had missed it altogether.

Suzuki was also outside the ordinary ruts in that, without any

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show of eccentricity, he did not present himself in the stereotype of the usual "Zen personality" which one finds among Japanese monks. Anyone visiting him for the first time, expecting to find an old gentleman with flashing eyes, sitting in a bare *shibui*-type room, and ready to engage you in swift and vigorous repartee, would have been very much surprised. For Suzuki, with his miraculous eyebrows, was more like a Chinese Taoist scholar—a sort of bookish Lao-tzu—gifted, as all good Taoists are, with what can only be called metaphysical humor. Every so often his eyes twinkled as if he had seen the Ultimate Joke, and as if, out of compassion for those who had not, he were refraining from laughing out loud.

He lived in the Western-style section of his home in Kamakura completely surrounded with piles of books and papers. This scholarly disarray was spread through several rooms, in each of which he was writing a separate book, or separate chapters of one book. He could thus move from room to room without having to clear away all his reference materials when feeling inclined to work upon one project rather than another, but somehow his admirable secretary Miss Okamura (who was actually an *apsara* sent down from the Western Paradise to take care of him in his old age) seemed to know where everything was.

Suzuki spoke slowly, deliberately and gently in excellent English with a slight and, to our ears, very pleasing Japanese accent. In conversation, he almost always explained himself with the aid of pen and paper, drawing diagrams to illustrate his points and Chinese characters to identify his terms. Though a man of wonderful patience, he had a genius for deflating windy argument or academic pedantry without giving offence. I remember a lecture where a member of the audience asked him, "Dr. Suzuki, when you use the word 'reality,' are you referring to the relative reality of the physical world, or to the absolute reality of the transcendental world?" He closed his eyes and went into that characteristic attitude which some of his students call "doing a Suzuki," for no one could tell whether he was in deep meditation or fast asleep. After about a minute's silence, though it seemed longer, he opened his eyes and said, "Yes."

During a class on the basic principles of Buddhism: "This morning we come to Fourth Noble Truth . . . called Noble Eightfold Path. First step of Noble Eightfold Path is called *shō ken*. *Shō ken* means Right View. All Buddhism is really summed up in Right View, because Right View is having no special view, no fixed view. Second step of Noble Eightfold Path . . . (and here there was a long pause). Oh, I forget second step. You look it up in the book." In the same vein, I remember his address to the final meeting of the 1936 World Congress of Faiths at the old Queen's Hall in London. The theme was "The Supreme Spiritual Ideal," and after several speakers had delivered themselves of volumes of hot air, Suzuki's turn came to take the platform. "When I was first asked," he said, "to talk about the Supreme Spiritual Ideal I did not exactly know what to answer. Firstly, I am just a simple-minded countryman from a far-away corner of the world suddenly thrust into the midst of this hustling city of London, and I am bewildered and my mind refuses to work in the same way that it does when I am in my own land. Secondly, how can a humble person like myself talk about such a grand thing as the Supreme Spiritual Ideal? . . . Really I do not know what Spiritual is, what Ideal is, and what Supreme Spiritual Ideal is." Whereupon he devoted the rest of his speech to a description of his house and garden in Japan, contrasting it with the life of a great city. This from the translator of the *Lankavatara Sutra*! And the audience gave him a standing ovation.

Being well aware of the relativity and inadequacy of all opinions, he would never argue. When a student tried to provoke him into a discussion of certain points upon which the celebrated Buddhist scholar Junjiro Takakusu differed from him, his only comment was, "This is very big world; plenty of room in it for both Professor Takakusu and myself." Well, perhaps there was one argument—when the Chinese scholar Hu Shih accused him of obscurantism (in asserting that Zen could not be expressed in rational language) and of lacking a sense of history. But in the course of a very courteous reply Suzuki said, "The Zen master, generally speaking, despises those who indulge in word- or idea-mongering, and in this respect

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Hu Shih and myself are great sinners, murderers of Buddhas and patriarchs; we are both destined for hell."

I have never known a great scholar and intellectual so devoid of conceit. When I first met Suzuki, I was flabbergasted that he asked me (aged 20) how to prepare a certain article, and that when I was brash enough to give my advice he followed it. Academic pomposity and testiness were simply not in him. Thus certain American sinologists, who make a fine art of demolishing one another with acrimonious footnotes, are apt to go into a huff about his rather casual use of documentation and "critical apparatus," and speak of him as a mere "popularizer." They do not realize that he genuinely loved scholarship and thus made no show of "being a scholar." He had no interest in using bibliography as a gimmick for boosting his personality.

Perhaps the real spirit of Suzuki could never be caught from his writings alone; one had to know the man. Many readers complain that his work is so un-Zen-like—verbose, discursive, obscure, and cluttered with technicalities. A Zen monk once explained to me that the attitude of *mushin* (the Zen style of unselfconsciousness) was like the Japanese carpenter who can build a house without a blue-print. I asked, "What about the man who draws a blue-print without making a plan for it?" This was, I believe, Suzuki's attitude in scholarship: he thought, he intellectualized, he pored over manuscripts and dictionaries as any Zen monk might sweep floors in the spirit of *mushin*. In his own words, "Man is a thinking reed but his great works are done when he is not calculating and thinking. 'Childlikeness' has to be restored with long years of training in the art of self-forgetfulness. When this is attained, man thinks yet he does not think. He thinks like showers coming down from the sky; he thinks like the waves rolling on the ocean; he thinks like the stars illuminating the nightly heavens; he thinks like the green foliage shooting forth in the relaxing spring breeze. Indeed, he is the showers, the ocean, the stars, the foliage."